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Who Was Watching Khomeini?

Western intelligence agencies have mounted a death watch on Ayatollah Khomeini, the 81-year-old Iranian mullah who is known to be in fragile health. Politically, however, Khomeini is as strong as an ox.

Three years ago Khomeini drew the attention of Western intelligence by arriving in Paris with his son Ahmed and two Muslim clergymen. French security agents tracked the ayatollah from the minute his plane touched down on Oct. 6, 1978, and obligingly gave the CIA a copy of their report on his activities during his first month in France.

My reporters Eileen O'Connor and Dale Van Atta have studied a secret CIA report based on information the agency got from French intelligence. The very fact that French intelligence devoted so much time and effort to an assessment of Khomeini should have been a clue to his potential importance. But the CIA misread the French information and concluded that Khomeini was merely the puppet of forces beyond his control.

The CIA summary of the French report notes that when Khomeini arrived in Paris, he "was welcomed by two well-known Iranian activists of the so-called 'Marxist-Islamic' group who are also affiliated with the Iranian National Front." It continues:

"The French police have long records on these two—Abdel Hassan Banisadr (age 45) and Sadegh Ghotbzadeh (age 40). They have been involved in an assassination attempt of a SAVAK [Iranian intelligence] officer, maintain close ties with pro-Soviet Palestinians and have direct organizational links with the Libyans and other radical groupings."

Bani-Sadr and Ghotbzadeh, who were to be leading figures in Khomeini's revolutionary regime just a few months later, "are the men who have been handling contacts with Khomeini," the CIA's Paris office explained to Washington, adding that "French intelligence has kept a file on his contacts."

"The ayatollah was informed upon arrival in Paris, according to a message from President Giscard to the Iranian ambassador, that 'his visit to France is considered touristic, his stay is provisional, and during his stay he must abstain from all political activity,'" the CIA report notes.

If the French were taking Khomeini seriously, the shah was not. "The initial official Iranian reaction to this French intent to restrain Khomeini was that Tehran was not requesting that Khomeini be muzzled," the CIA in Paris informed Washington, adding: "In fact, the Iranians specifically asked the French not to restrain Khomeini. Subsequently, however, there was a direct request from the shah to Giscard to stop the flow of vitriolic anti-Iranian propaganda from the ayatollah."

There was no hint that the shah appreciated the mortal danger Khomeini posed to his throne. It was characteristic of the shah—and his CIA buddies—that Khomeini's anti-shah pronouncements were called "anti-Iranian." As events would soon show, the ayatollah was more in tune with the Iranian people than the shah was.

The CIA report finally shows a faint glimmer of understanding: "Regardless of his own basic motivations, Khomeini's influence is destructive and possibly the most dangerous currently being employed against the shah."